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All faith communities must stop putting children at risk

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Ever since I began reading about the priest sexual abuse scandal years ago, I have wondered whether Protestants would have handled it any better than Catholics have.

I doubt it, although Protestant failures almost certainly would have been different from Catholic miscarriages.

The primary Catholic failure, as I judge it from the outside, has been the inexcusable propensity to protect the church at the expense of children.

By contrast (but nonetheless related to the Catholic response), the Protestant failure probably would have been to assume that perpetrators could be cured by God's grace and thus given countless chances.

In both cases, the churches would have missed (or did miss) the big and painfully obvious point, which is that their first responsibility is to protect -- and, more than that, to love -- the most vulnerable people in their care, the children.

As a result of the Catholic dissoluteness, the scandal has been lapping at the door of the pope, whose inconsistent words and actions have given reasonable people cause to wonder whether he understands what needs to be done and why.

All of this has been profoundly disheartening -- certainly to Catholics but beyond that to other Christians and even to people of other faiths. It's been easy -- and tempting -- to stand outside the Catholic church and throw stones of blame. But that response no more represents the spirit of Christ than did Catholic authorities who protected recidivistic molesters.

Rather, what the Catholic scandal should move Protestants and others to do is to examine our own houses, which are far from pure.

Sexual misconduct in Protestant churches certainly includes abuse of children. Soon after the Catholic scandal broke nationally in 2002, *The Christian Science Monitor* reported that "most American churches being hit with child sexual-abuse allegations are Protestant, and most of the alleged abusers are not clergy or staff, but church volunteers."

So that's one place all faith communities must look to stop putting children at risk.

But Protestant sexual misconduct, for many reasons -- including the fact that clergy can be married -- tends to range more widely and to include violations of marital vows. I've seen that up close and personal in my own congregation.

As Catholics and Protestants seek to prevent such abuse, it's vital that we understand the role power plays. Jesus certainly understood this seductive dynamic and sought to combat it by suggesting that the first be last and the last first and that the true leader be a servant.

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But churches have been at best inconsistent about creating policies that implement such a radical vision. As a result, we wind up with authority figures taking advantage of children or of vulnerable members of the congregation who come seeking help.

So we must remember that when power is out of balance and essentially unchecked, abuse is much more likely to occur. From my Protestant perspective, this is more of a problem for a church with a hierarchical polity but it's not one that even the most congregational of polities in Protestantism always avoid.

There are many reasons to maintain confidentiality within churches, especially in counseling or pastoral relationships. But this, too, is an area rife with abuse possibilities when proper confidentiality morphs into secrecy aimed at hiding sinful activities.

Knowing that, we must create rules of confidentiality that operate within a system of checks-and-balances that does not encourage hiding what should not be hidden.

In one sense we all live in glass houses and, thus, should use our stones as paper weights, not projectiles. But in another sense, we all know where to hide inside those glass houses. We know, in other words, where temptation lies.

When we create systems for protecting vulnerable people we must account for the reality that without strict checks on what an old hymn calls our "bent to sinning," both Catholics and Protestants -- to our eternal shame -- put defenseless people at risk.

Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for The Kansas City Star, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for The Star's Web site and a monthly column for The Presbyterian Outlook. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. E-mail him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.

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